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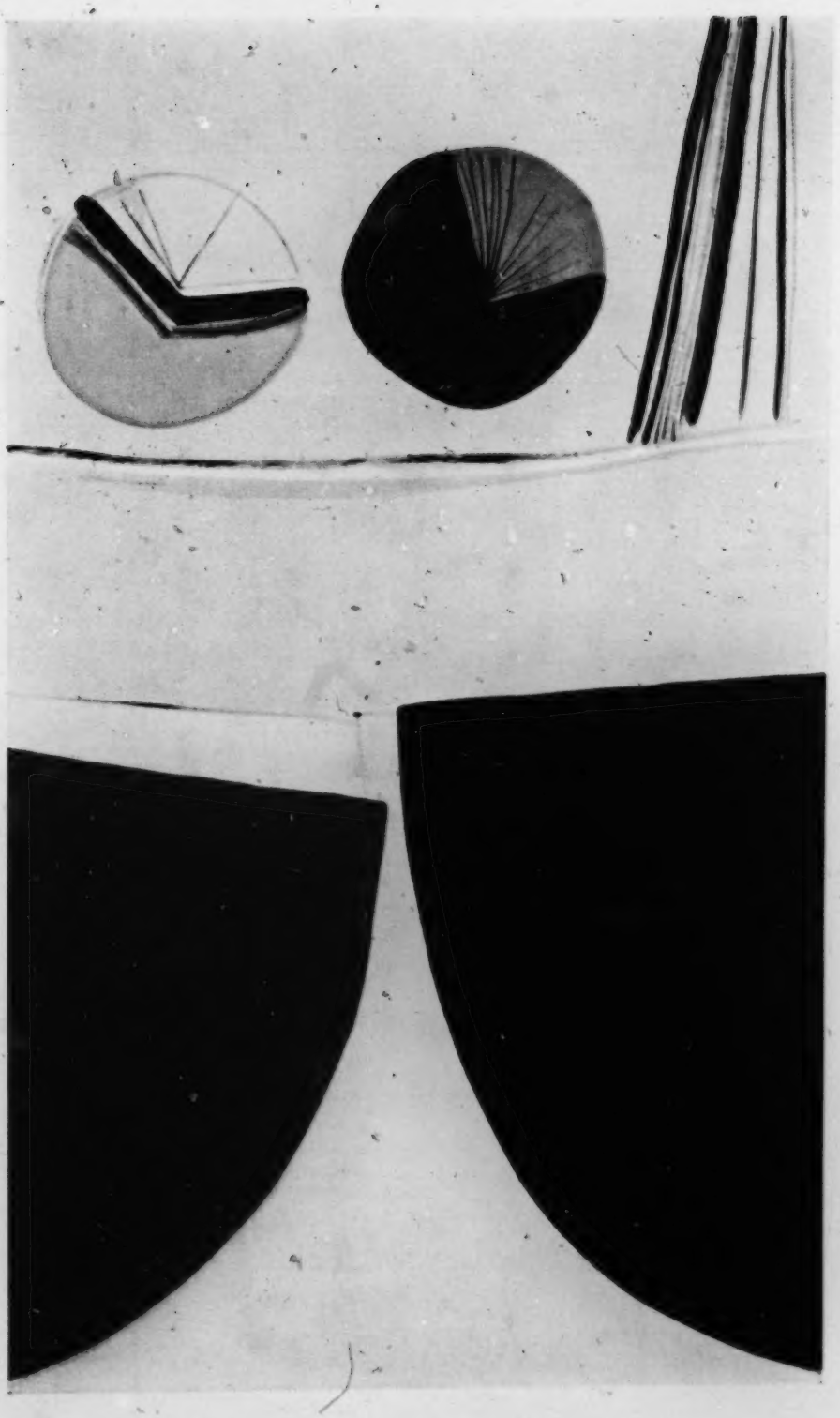
TERRY FROST



RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

Cover Plate: Red and Black Plus Three. November 1962 (No. 45)

TERRY FROST

RETROSPECTIVE
EXHIBITION
1964

ORGANIZED BY—

THE LAING ART GALLERY
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE
AND THE ARTS COUNCIL
OF GREAT BRITAIN

The Artist in His Studio

Foreword

This exhibition presents to the public for the first time a comprehensive range of the work of Terry Frost from his earliest serious efforts in 1947 to his latest paintings of last year. It has not, hitherto, been possible to appreciate fully his evolution and achievement as an artist. With a painting career of nearly twenty years behind him, and a rapidly growing international reputation, the time seemed ripe for a full-scale retrospective exhibition so that a proper evaluation of his contribution to twentieth century painting might be made.

Such an exhibition is rendered possible only through the kind co-operation of many people, and first I should like to thank the various owners of the paintings (a list of which appears in the catalogue) for their generosity in making their pictures available for this purpose. Secondly I should like to give special thanks to Mr. Philip James, C.B.E., for his valuable introduction to the catalogue, and for his able assistance in the selection of the paintings. Grateful thanks are due also to Mr. Victor and Mr. Leslie Waddington, of the Waddington Galleries, for their generous and willing help at all stages of the exhibition. The whole-hearted and enthusiastic co-operation of the artist from the beginning has been a constant source of inspiration. Valuable help has also been given by the North Eastern Association for the Arts.

Finally, I should like to offer my grateful thanks to the Arts Council of Great Britain for kindly undertaking the entire collection and transportation of the exhibition and the arrangement of its subsequent tour. The exhibition will be shown at the following places:—

Newcastle upon Tyne, Laing Art Gallery, 11 April–2 May
York, City Art Gallery, 9–30 May
Kingston upon Hull, Ferens Art Gallery, 6–27 June
Bradford, City Art Gallery and Museum, 4–25 July

B. COLLINGWOOD STEVENSON,
Director, Laing Art Gallery.

Biographical Note

Born 1915, Leamington Spa: 1943 started painting in prisoner-of-war camp in Germany: 1946 moved to St. Ives, studied at St. Ives School of Painting: 1947 continued studies at Camberwell School of Art, London: 1950 returned to St. Ives, elected member Penwith Society of Arts: 1951 exhibited—A.I.A. Abstract Exhibition, Abstract Exhibition, New York, Gimpel Fils Abstract Exhibition: 1952 included in Contemporary Art Society Exhibition at Tate Gallery and British Abstract Art, New York. Represented in numerous group exhibitions in this country and in British Council touring exhibitions abroad. Regular one-man shows in London since 1952, New York since 1960, Zurich 1963. Gregory Fellow in Painting, Leeds University, 1954–56.

Public collections: Arts Council; British Council; Tate Gallery; Victoria and Albert Museum; Gulbenkian Foundation; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh; Ulster Museum, Belfast; Freunde der Junge Kunst; Contemporary Art Society; Wakefield City Art Gallery; Leeds City Art Gallery; University of Leeds; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne; Ferens Art Gallery, Hull; Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal; Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; City Museum and Art Gallery, Aberdeen; Plymouth Art Gallery; Oldham Art Gallery; Huddersfield Art Gallery; Leamington Spa Art Gallery, and National Gallery of Canada.

Introduction

by Philip James

Terry Frost was born in Leamington Spa in 1915 and from the age of fourteen he earned his living with a radio and electrical wholesaler at Birmingham but it was not until he met Adrian Heath in a prisoner of war camp that he had his first lessons in painting. The Red Cross sent out parcels of colours and further supplies were obtained by barter with the German guards. Even in these surroundings Frost's visual experiences were meaningful. " The fall of the last leaf was a tragedy."

His first efforts, mostly portraits in the style of Van Gogh, showed no precosity and his skill was not above the average; but he knew now that he wanted to be a painter. On his release from the army in 1945 he married and went back to the radio business but became ill through frustration and his inability to live as a painter. He then moved to St. Ives where he worked in an academic style at a local art school. Here his desire to become a professional painter was strengthened by his contacts with Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth (for whom he worked as an assistant), Peter Lanyon, Patrick Heron and others who lived in or near St. Ives, the only regional centre of any importance that has contributed to the development of English contemporary art.

So we find him in 1947 as a student at Camberwell School of Art where Coldstream, Pasmore, Rogers, Gowing, Martin and Townsend were on the staff. Pasmore introduced him to Cubism and particularly to the work of Gris. " I couldn't see my way then through Picasso and was more interested in the analytical approach of Gris." He at once found himself far more in sympathy with Pasmore's move towards abstraction than with the new realism of the ex-Euston Road painters. For it was exactly at this moment (1948) that Pasmore, to the consternation of many of his admirers and patrons exchanged his personal brand of pointillism and Whistlerian arabesques—the Chiswick and Hammersmith views with river scenes—for his first purely non-figurative paintings and collages. Frost was similarly concerned with the geometric division of the rectangle of the canvas and painted his first abstract in the same year.

Two years later he returned to St. Ives and began a series of paintings in which a shape like a slice of melon predominates. This was of course derived from the boats filling the little harbour which were daily visual experience for him. Of all the abstract painters who have belonged to what can be called the St. Ives School, Frost has shown more than most the influence of his environment. He has described how at this date he drew on his surroundings:

> " I have recently completed a ' blue movement ' painting. I had spent a number of evenings looking out over the harbour at St. Ives. Although I had been observing a multiplicity of movements during those evenings, they all evoked a common emotion or mood—a state of delight in front of nature. On one particular blue twilit evening I was watching what I can only describe as a synthesis of movement and counter-movement. That is to say the rise and fall of the boats, the space drawing of the mastheads, the opposing movements of the incoming sea and out-blowing offshore wind—all this plus the predominant feel of blue in the evening and the static brown of the foreshore, generated an emotional state which was to find expression in the painting *Blue Movement*.

In this painting I was trying to give expression to my total experience of that particular evening. I was not portraying the boats, the sand, the horizon or any other subject-matter but concentrating on the emotion engendered by what I saw. The subject-matter is in fact the sensation evolved by the movements and the colour in the harbour. What I have painted is an arrangement of form and colour which evokes for me a similar feeling."*

This feeling for form and colour led him to try his hand at a number of collages which gave him a certain freedom in arranging the spatial division of the rectangle and a natural step from this technique would have been to the relief. Indeed for a time he felt an urge towards this development which Pasmore was now exploring, and in a letter to Pasmore he wrote: " I can really agree with you about reliefs for I went naturally towards what I call space sculpture and reliefs, though mine were mainly confined to easy materials that required little technical knowledge. It seemed so natural after working with paper." But he found reliefs difficult to construct and he had strong convictions about the use of colour in a structural way. Colour, he felt, painted on to a flat surface must alter the space division of the canvas and create a fresh problem which itself becomes the subject of the picture.

" My colours are not so much evocative as associative, linked with my idea. My idea may have a subject or it may not. The subject may have had any colour and form but my idea will be a particular colour and have a particular proportion but it will be liable to change once work is begun on the canvas—change by growth to the form which is the idea in paint. There is nothing at the end of the visual sensation which might have been the starting-point of the idea. I have recently painted a blue and brown picture; it started off in good shape and the blues were the best I have ever obtained; but they did not make the object I was after. So after a long struggle the blues eventually had to be removed and the picture is now true, is now what I wanted. It is! With the blue it wasn't. The blue will have to be made some other time!"†

An important widening of his experience now came through his appointment to the staff at Corsham following his first one-man show at the Leicester Galleries in 1952.

Only two years later, in 1954, he was appointed Gregory Fellow at Leeds University, a post created through one of those many gestures of generous and undemonstrative patronage of contemporary art for which its founder the late Eric Gregory will be long remembered. The holder is not required to teach but merely to be in residence and he is able and encouraged to continue his own career as an artist. Frost's response to his new surroundings was immediate. The change from the claustrophobic cobbled alleys of St. Ives to the spacious Yorkshire moors brought a marked change in his palette, his composition and his draughtsmanship. The smoke-darkened industrial scene and the surrounding virgin winter landscape impelled him to a striking discovery of black and white (No. 18) as hueless colours. " If you want to see black it's a good place to go to. There's no frivolity about a pure snow-covered landscape—it's pure form." His compositions took on a marked verticality. The vertical stripes seem to be connected with the stone walls and bare trees but a landscape on that scale can easily be read vertically as well as horizontally. This feeling for the vertical is seen too in another two series of paintings dating from this prolific period. In one a large hexagonal shape dominates

* L. Alloway. *Nine abstract painters, their work and theory, 1954.*

† from the artist's notebook.

the composition ("that's a walk I had with Herbert Read at Stonegrave when I saw the sun setting behind a wood in winter"); in the other the free use of a dribbled stain (No. 20) indicates the impact of American abstract-expressionism which hit this country with a terrific impact in 1956 and also can be linked with his meetings at that time with Sam Francis in Paris. In all the works of this Leeds period Frost's draughtsmanship assumed a tautness and precision which it had previously lacked. His developing creative talent had received a powerful new stimulus.

With his return to St. Ives in 1956 after the expiry of the Gregory fellowship he was able to give up teaching as he was now on the books of the Waddington Galleries. There is a more rhythmic movement in this work and he returned to the use of collage in the form of linen patches. " This had much to do with the light down there. Also a shape when done in linen has a toughness about it and this too has something to do with the environment." His movements (and he uses this word as a title) and his forms now assume an increasing force and tension. Derivations from the human form and landscape are often discernible.

By now Frost had achieved the position of a leading figure in one of the two main groups of non-figurative painters which have flourished since the war both in Europe and America whose style is free, irrational, undisciplined, essentially painterly, and preoccupied with spatial problems. The other group is of course the constructivists, headed in this country by Pasmore (in spite of his exceptional painterly gifts and frequent return to pure painting), and the " hard-edge " group of what the American critic Clement Greenberg has called " post-painterly " abstractionists.

Closely associated in feeling and intention with Frost are Roger Hilton and William Scott. Each however aims to create his own version of pictorial space. Hilton cannot make a mark on a canvas that is not charged with meaning, and scraggy and lean as his forms are and spiky as his drawing is he achieves great potency and authority in an idiom which makes him the most purely conceptual and strictly non-figurative painter of the three. Scott with his unique combination of a puritanical austerity of composition (notably based on the kitchen table and its appurtenances) with a strong feeling for the sensuous quality of the paint surface has looked more consistently towards France—Bonnard is an obvious source of inspiration for him—and only more recently towards American non-figurative painting, and he has on the whole been an abstract painter in the true sense of the word. In Frost one often finds a combination of both approaches. This is evident in his most recent work where there is a new repertory of essentially romantic images—circles, chevrons, wedges and segmented discs containing a wide variety of formal elements which have inevitably been likened to traffic signs, a calligraphic geometry of great inventiveness. " I put all the things I ever knew into these," he said. In fact the wedges (or boat-prows as they have also been called), two of which confront each other like knights in a tournament in a number of canvases, are inspired by a bikini-top seen on a Welsh beach; so these formal elements are perhaps more deeply rooted in external stimuli than one realises at first sight. It is also evident that the reactions of critics and the public can themselves react on the artist as in this instance Frost has included capital letters forming part of a place-name as from a sign-post in a new series of paintings on which he is now working. When he discovers some confirmation as it were of his instinctive choice of an image it assumes by this very act of confirmation a greater importance for him. One sees this in his development of the use of a symbol, the arrow-head or chevron for instance. It begins as a nipple (No. 33; 34) and then becomes a point of tension between an angle and a curve (No. 46) and finally a chevron in its own right since he met it face to face on a battle-standard in the chapel at Compton Wynyates (No. 48).

The dynamism of this new work owes much to a certain recklessness and daring which inevitably implies an occasional unevenness. The rapidity of execution is matched by the stridency of the colours, often the three primaries, used at their fullest intensity. Black, also, he continues to use with an authority and touch quite his own. There is here a strong feeling for direct action, a deliberate refusal to play safe, a suspension of thought in the creative act. This approach to painting the artist himself has described and his own words form an appropriate conclusion to this brief note on his work.

> " When I am painting I am not concerned with theory however much thinking I may have done before I started to paint. When I am really painting—no! I cannot describe that, for all I know is that as soon as I realise I have been painting I have stopped. I am only concerned with what I am to do next. When I do paint I am discovering what I have to do. Thought for me is before and after but not at the time. When one is thinking there are so many possibilities. When one paints one *knows*; and the statement is definite. Granted some statements are better than others. That's it! That's why I paint. Thinking about painting while painting would be like rowing a boat with the bung out. When I make a painting it is with paint on a flat surface and belongs to itself. It has nothing to do with imitation or representation, though my idea may be and usually is started by an experience of nature or rather the experience of one human being wandering, observing, questioning, worrying, trying to see the truth, trying to penetrate the mystery of life. Because we are a mystery. Science will try to prove that we are not. Convention wants us to think we are not. If we dare to let our intuition or inner self really see, then we know we are a mystery and art is part of our mystery."†

† from the artist's notebook.

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Ward, C. W. ... 20, 24

Catalogue

Measurements are given in inches, height preceding width.

1 **Kathleen, 1947**
Oil on board, 18 × 14
Lent by Mrs. Kathleen Frost

2 **Chair, 1947**
Oil on canvas, 24 × 20
Lent by the Artist

3 **Madrigal, 1949**
Oil on canvas, 28 × 36
Lent by the Artist

4 **Walk along the Quay, 1950**
Oil on canvas, 60 × 22
Lent by Adrian Heath, Esq.

5 **Blue and Yellow Collage, 1951**
Collage, 20 × 24
Lent by the Artist

6 **Green and Black Movement, 1951**
Oil on canvas, 44 × 34
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

7 **Porthmeor, 1951**
Oil on board, 3 × 14½
Lent by Philip James, Esq., C.B.E.

8 **Grey and White Seascape, 1952**
Oil on canvas, 16 × 30
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

9 **Blue Moonset, 1952**
Oil on board, 10 × 14
Lent by Dr. Henry M. Roland

10 **Coastal Figure, 1952–53**
Oil on board, 120 × 41
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

11 **Yellow, Blue, Black and White, 1953**
Oil on canvas, 24 × 20
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

12 **Silver and White, 1953**
Oil on canvas, 43¾ × 30
Lent by Roger Mayne, Esq.

13 **Yellow Painting, 1954**
Oil on board, 48 × 69
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

14 **Yellow Verticals, 1954**
Oil on canvas, 28½ × 50½
Lent by R. H. H. Duncan, Esq.

15 **Tall Red and Yellow, 1954**
Oil on canvas, 60 × 25
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

16 **Yellow, Red and Black, 1955**
Oil on canvas, 45 × 40
Lent by John Burney, Esq.

17 **Red, Black and White, 1955–56**
Oil on canvas, 34 × 43¾
Lent by Roger Mayne, Esq.

18 **Red, Black and White, 1956**
Oil on board, 48 × 37
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Manson

19 **Pink Quay Painting, 1956**
Oil on board, 36 × 41
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

20 **Blue Painting, 1957**
Oil on canvas, 30 × 25
Lent by C. W. Ward, Esq.

21 **Red Border, November 1957**
Oil on canvas, 63 × 68
Lent by William Scott, Esq.

22 **Yellow Triptych, 1957–59**
Oil on board, 90 × 144
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

23 **High Yellow No. 2, 1958-59**
Oil on canvas, 58 × 48
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

24 **Brown, White and Black, 1959**
Oil on board, 50 × 18
Lent by C. W. Ward, Esq.

25 **Black and Orange, 1959**
Oil on canvas, 18 × 19¾
Lent by Miss Margaret Gardiner

26 Lemon Yellow, Black and White, May 1959
Oil on canvas, 25 × 30
Lent by the Lord Croft

27 White Wedged Figure, July 1959
Oil on canvas, 18¼ × 24½
Lent by R. H. H. Duncan, Esq.

28 Black, White and Ochre, 1959
Oil on canvas, 40 × 50
Lent by Professor I. Manton, the University of Leeds

29 Arrowed Figure, 1959
Oil on canvas, 63 × 84
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

30 Black and Purple, 1959
Oil on canvas, 30 × 25
Lent by J. G. Gilbey, Esq.

31 Painting, 1959–60
Oil on canvas, 48 × 48
Lent by the Municipal Art Gallery, Oldham

32 Black Arrow, 1960
Oil on canvas, 60 × 45
Lent by Colonel A. Gregory-Hood

33 Red, Black and White, Spring 1960
Collage and oil on canvas, 30 × 25
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

34 Three Graces, June 1960
Oil on canvas with canvas collage, 78 × 96
Lent by the Friends of Bristol City Art Gallery

35 Red, Black and White, July 1960
Oil on canvas, 48 × 48
Lent by the University of Leeds

36 Force Eight, October 1960
Oil on canvas, 87 × 68
Lent by Ferens Art Gallery, Kingston upon Hull

37 Brown and Mars Yellow, 1960–61
Oil on canvas, 48 × 25
Lent by Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal

38 Red, Black and White, January 1961
Oil on canvas, 48 × 36
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Damiano

39 **Lemon and White, March 1961**
Oil on canvas, 48 × 25
Lent by Huddersfield Art Gallery

40 **Red Vertical, May 1961**
Oil on canvas, 25 × 30
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. George Dannatt

41 **Linen, White and Red, June/July 1961**
Canvas collage; oil on canvas, 48 × 48
Lent by Dr. Antony M. Steward

42 **Three Graces, Red, Black and White, 1962**
Oil on canvas, 78 × 96
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

43 **White October, 1962**
Oil on canvas, 50 × 40
Lent by the City Art Gallery, Plymouth

44 **M. 17 October '62**
Oil on canvas, 72 × 72
Lent by the British Council

45 **Red and Black Plus Three, November 1962**
Oil on canvas, 100 × 60
Lent by the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne

46 **Yellow Entry, January 1963**
Oil on canvas, 60 × 95¾
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

47 **Lemon and White, Spring 1963**
Oil on canvas, 49 × 36
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Justin Knowles

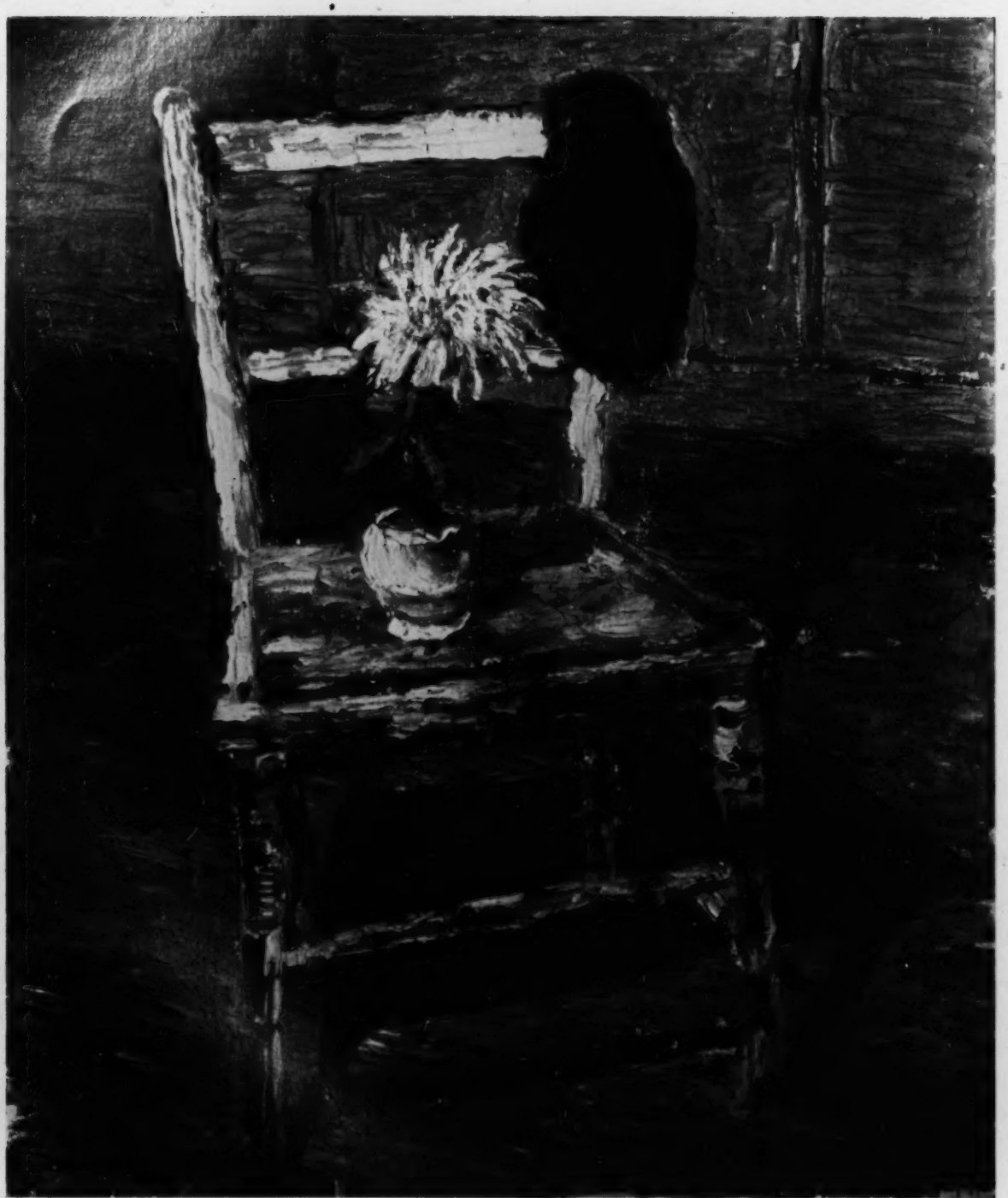
48 **Chevron for Compton, 1963**
Oil on canvas, 48 × 48
Lent by B. C. Gillinson, Esq., J.P., M.A.

49 **May 'A' Day, 1963**
Oil on canvas, 60 × 60
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

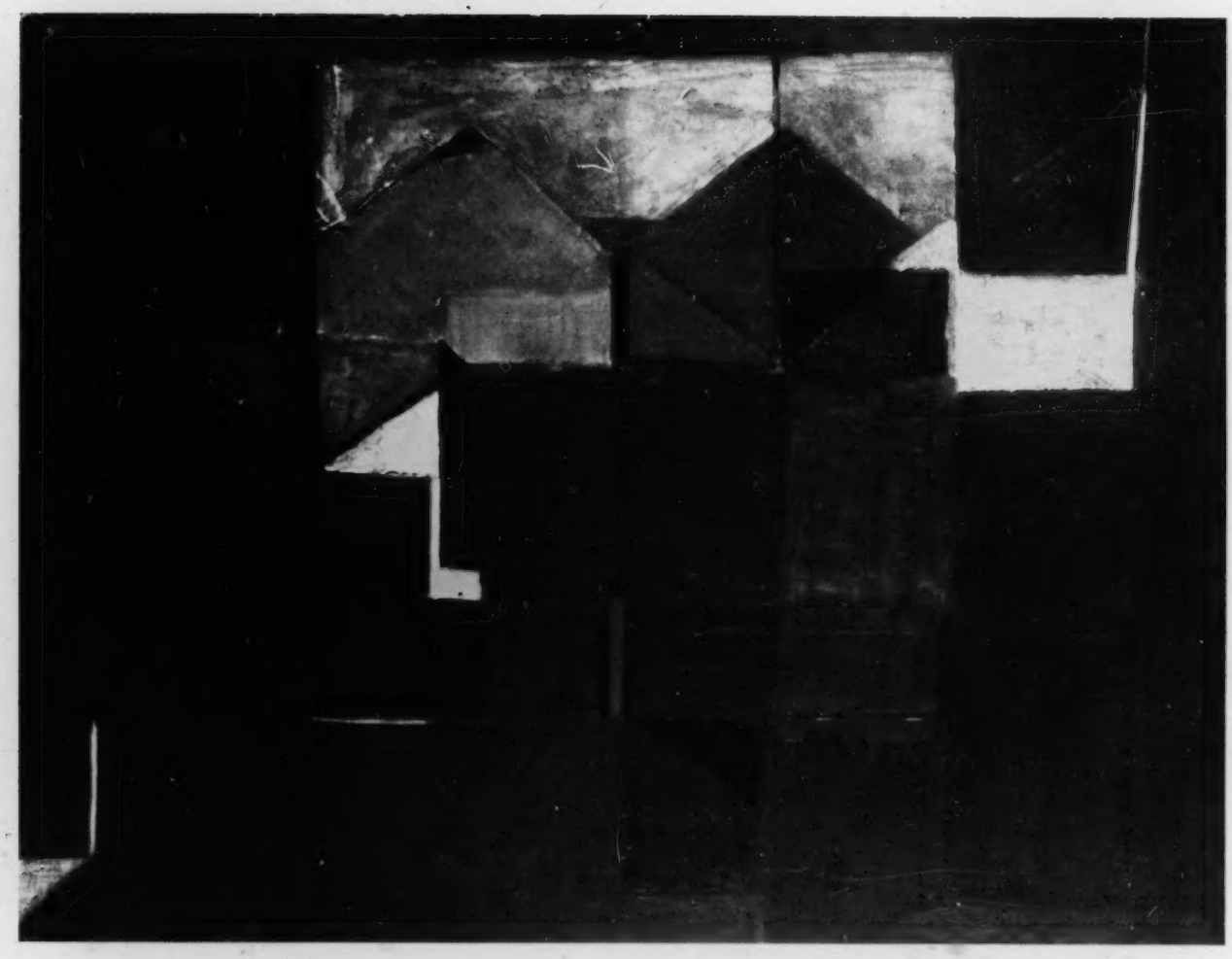
50 **M. 13 June '63**
Oil on canvas, 60 × 48
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

51 **Two for Penarth, August 1963**
Oil on canvas, 38 × 50
Lent by the Waddington Galleries

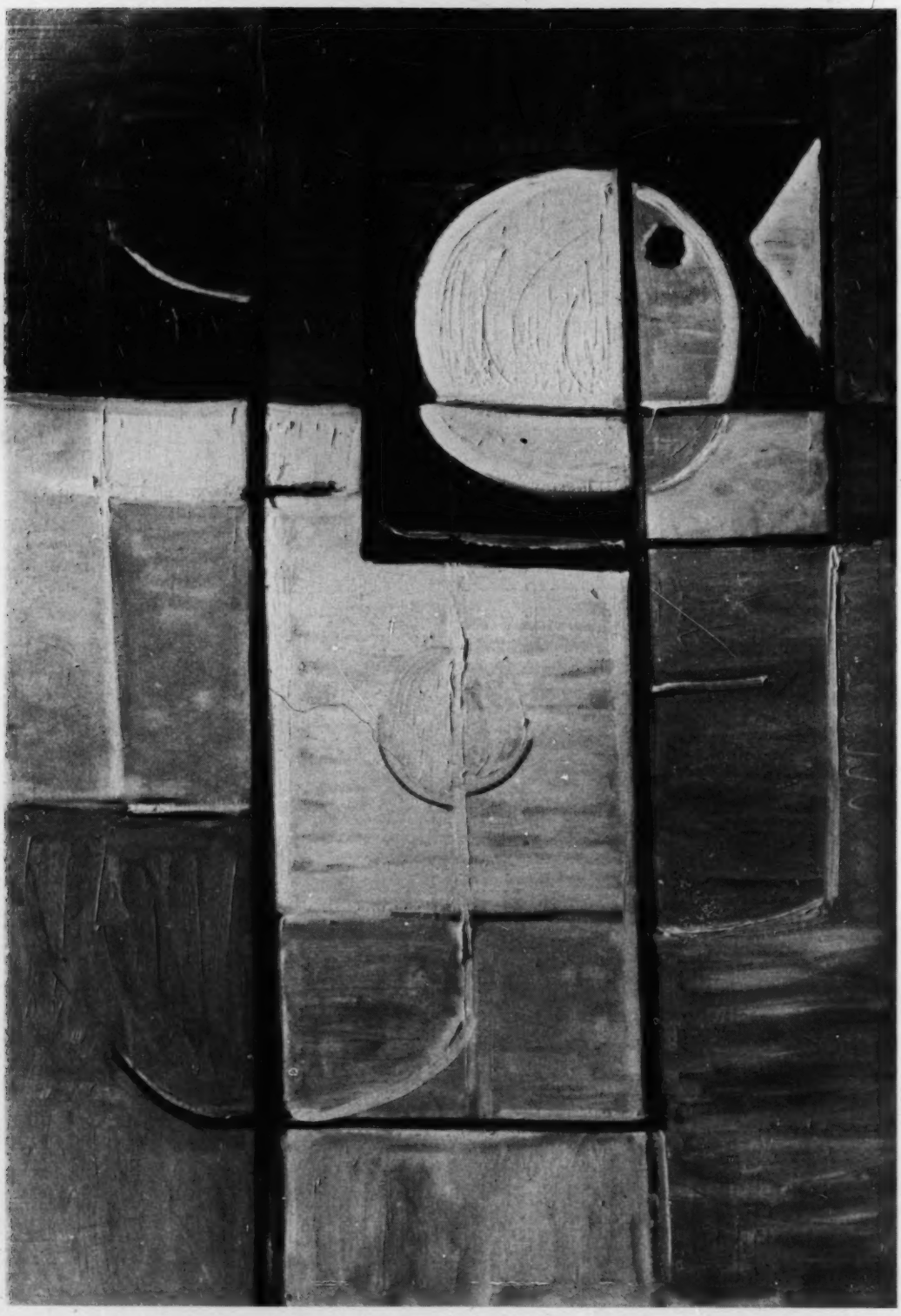
Catalogue No. 1 Kathleen, 1947



Catalogue No. 2 Chair, 1947



Catalogue No. 3 Madrigal, 1949



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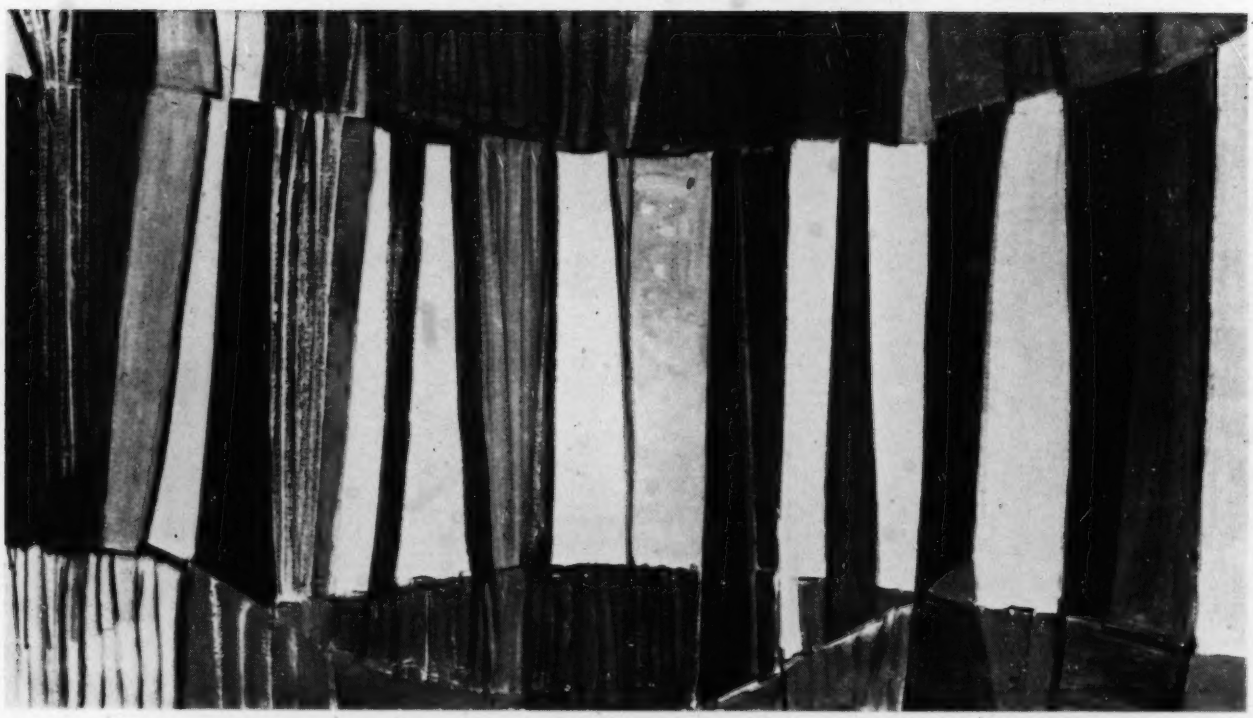
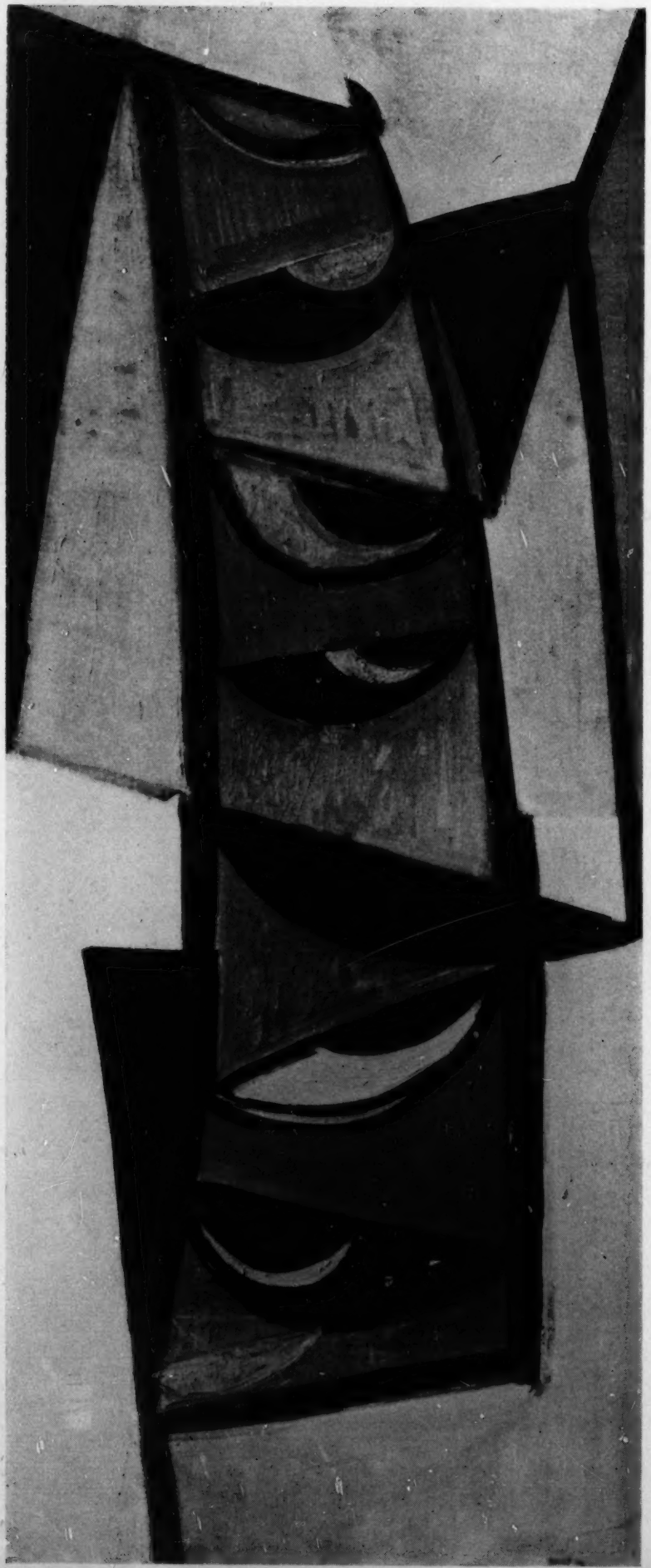
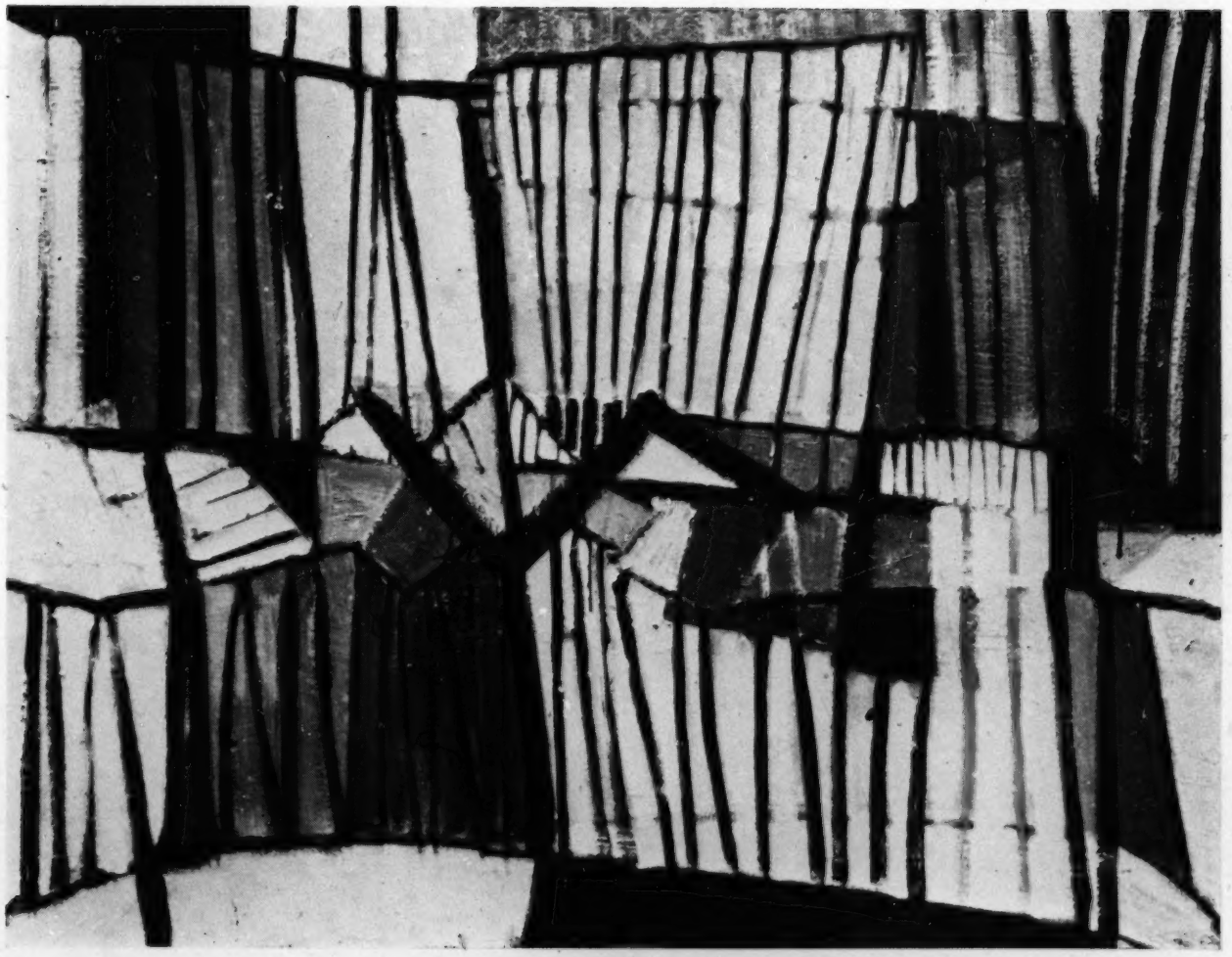


Catalogue No. 14 Yellow Verticals, 1954



Catalogue No. 15 Tall Red and Yellow, 1954



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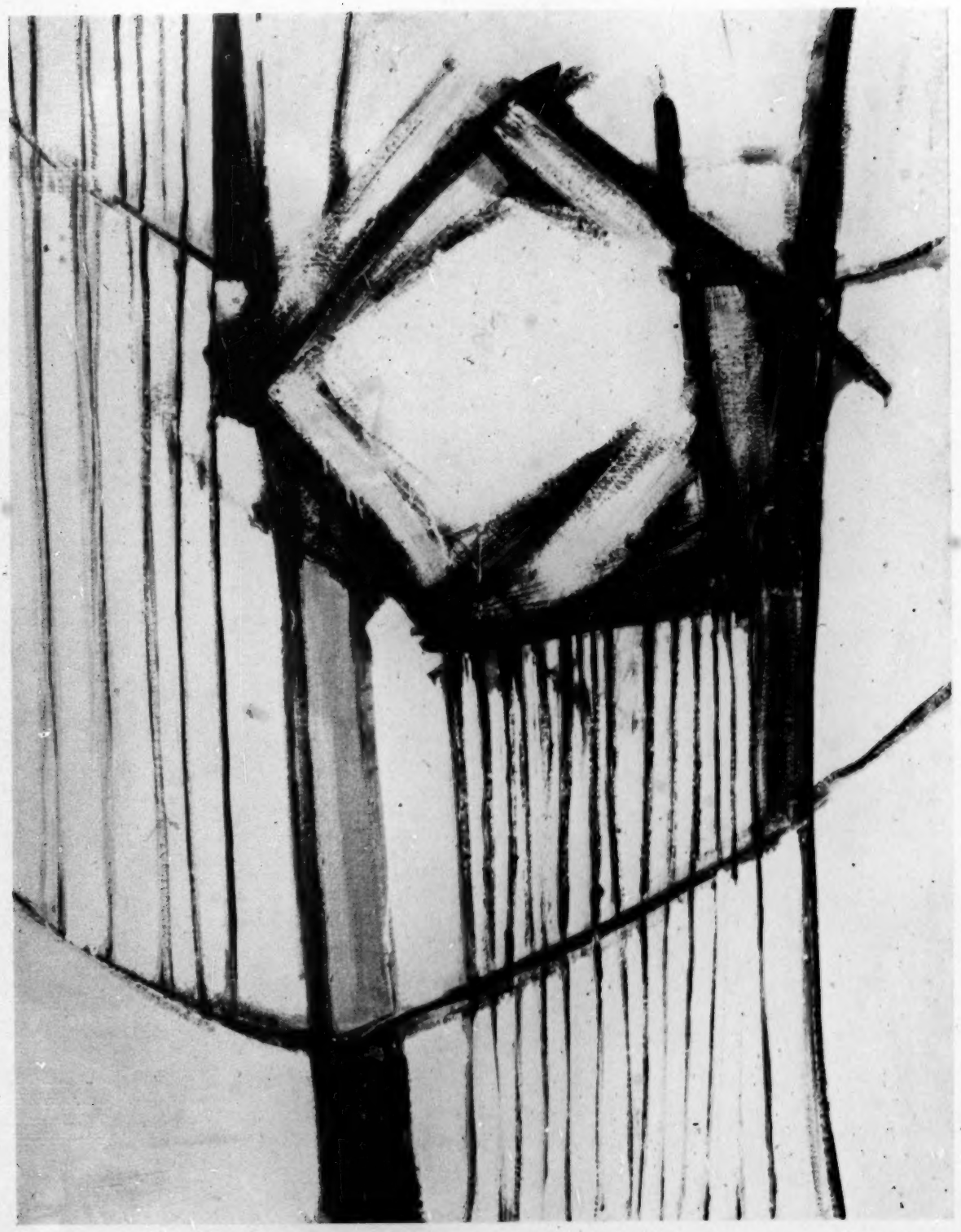
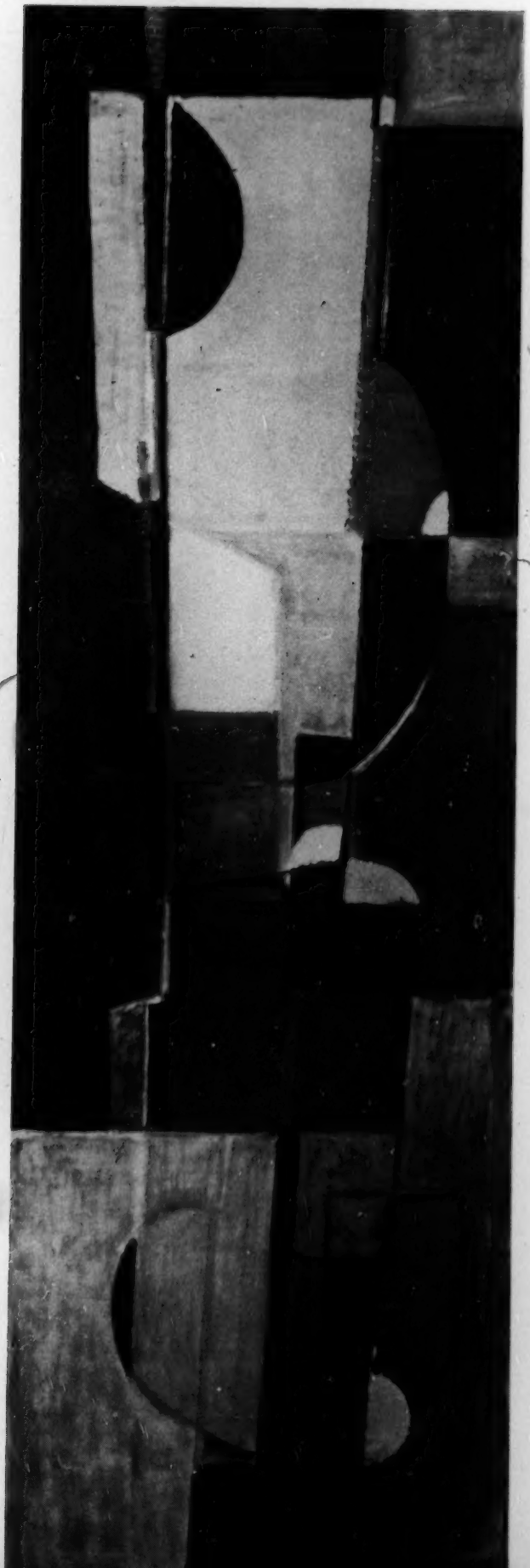
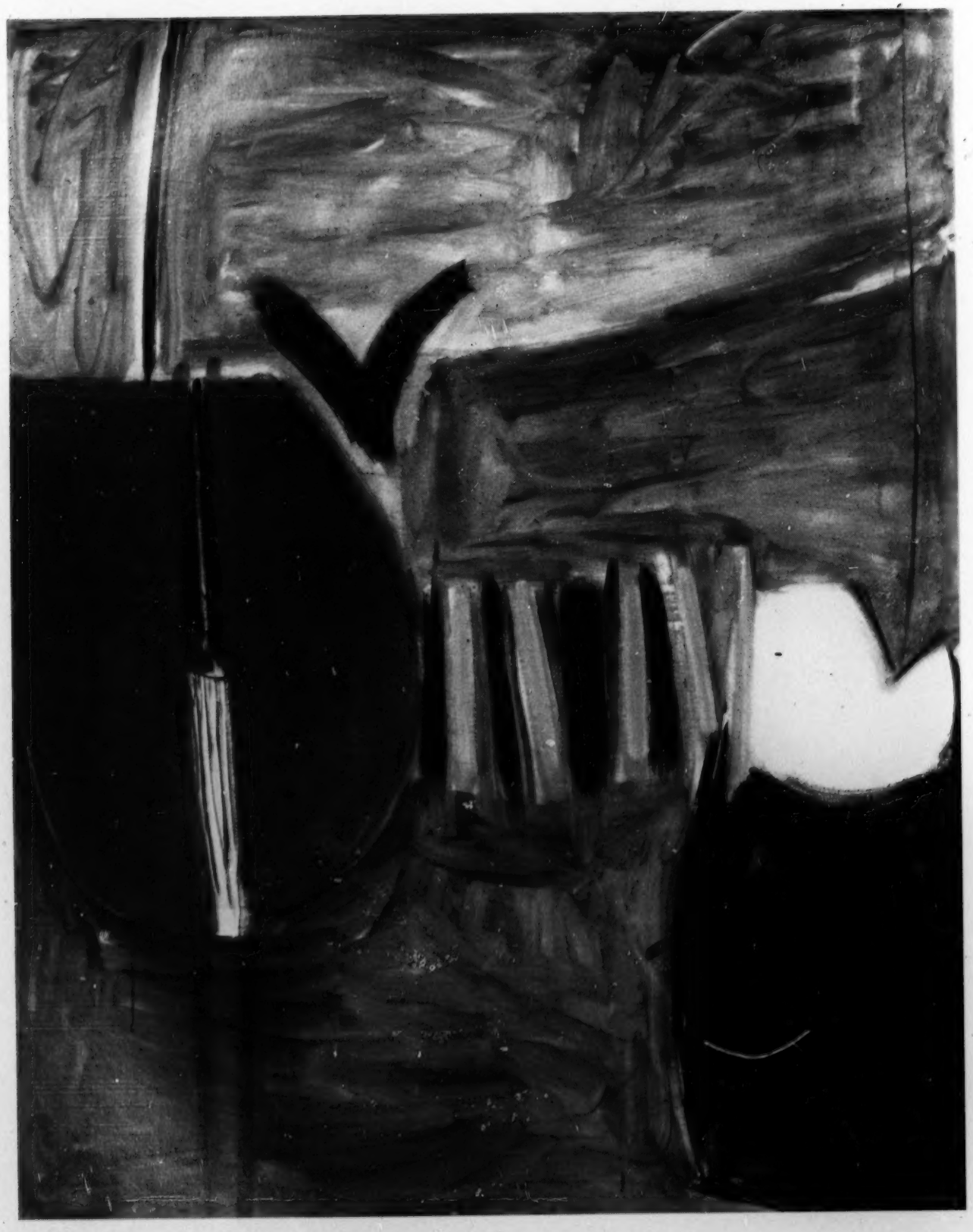


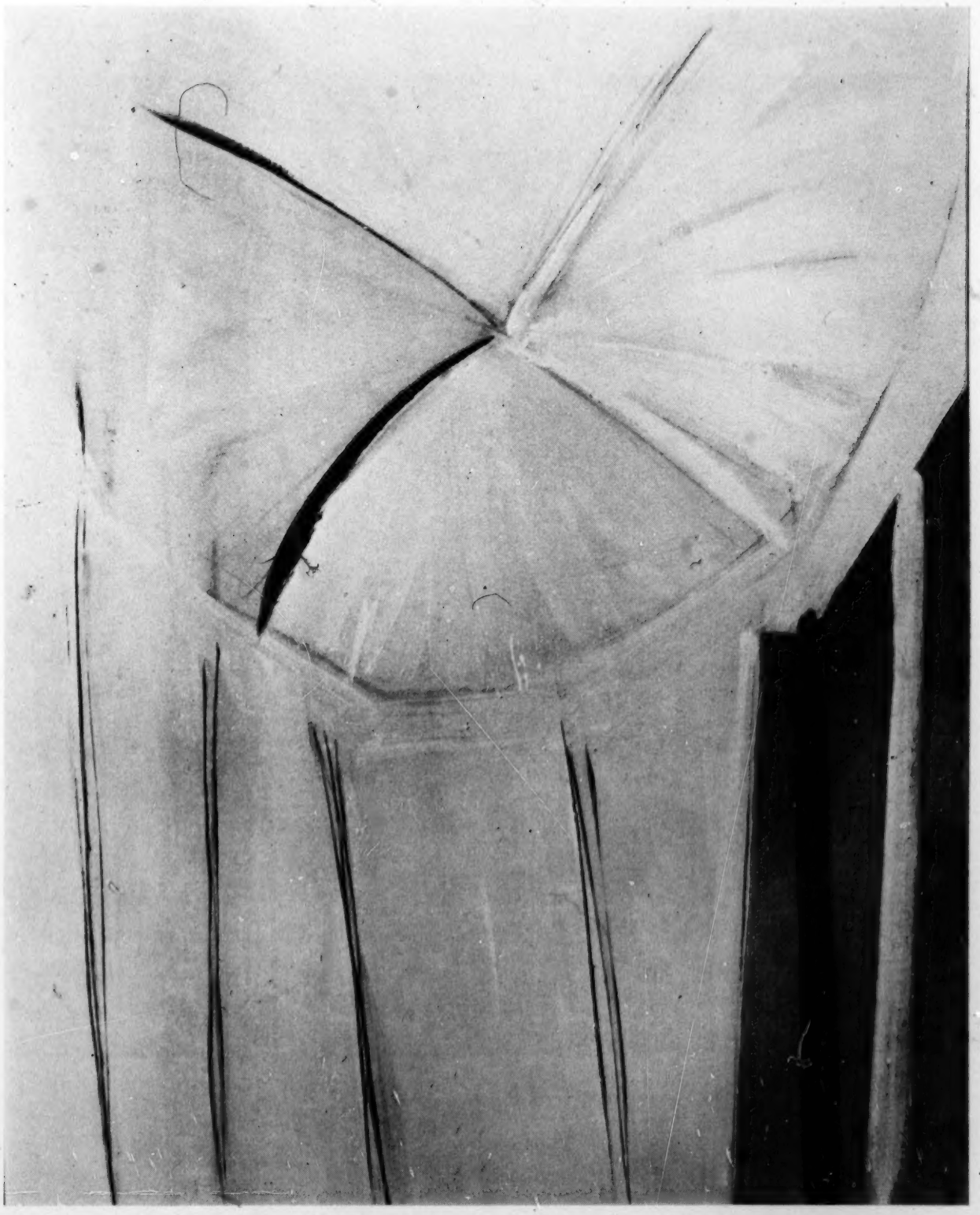
Catalogue No. 18 Red, Black and White, 1956



Catalogue No. 4 Walk along the Quay, 1950



Catalogue No. 36 Force Eight, October 1960



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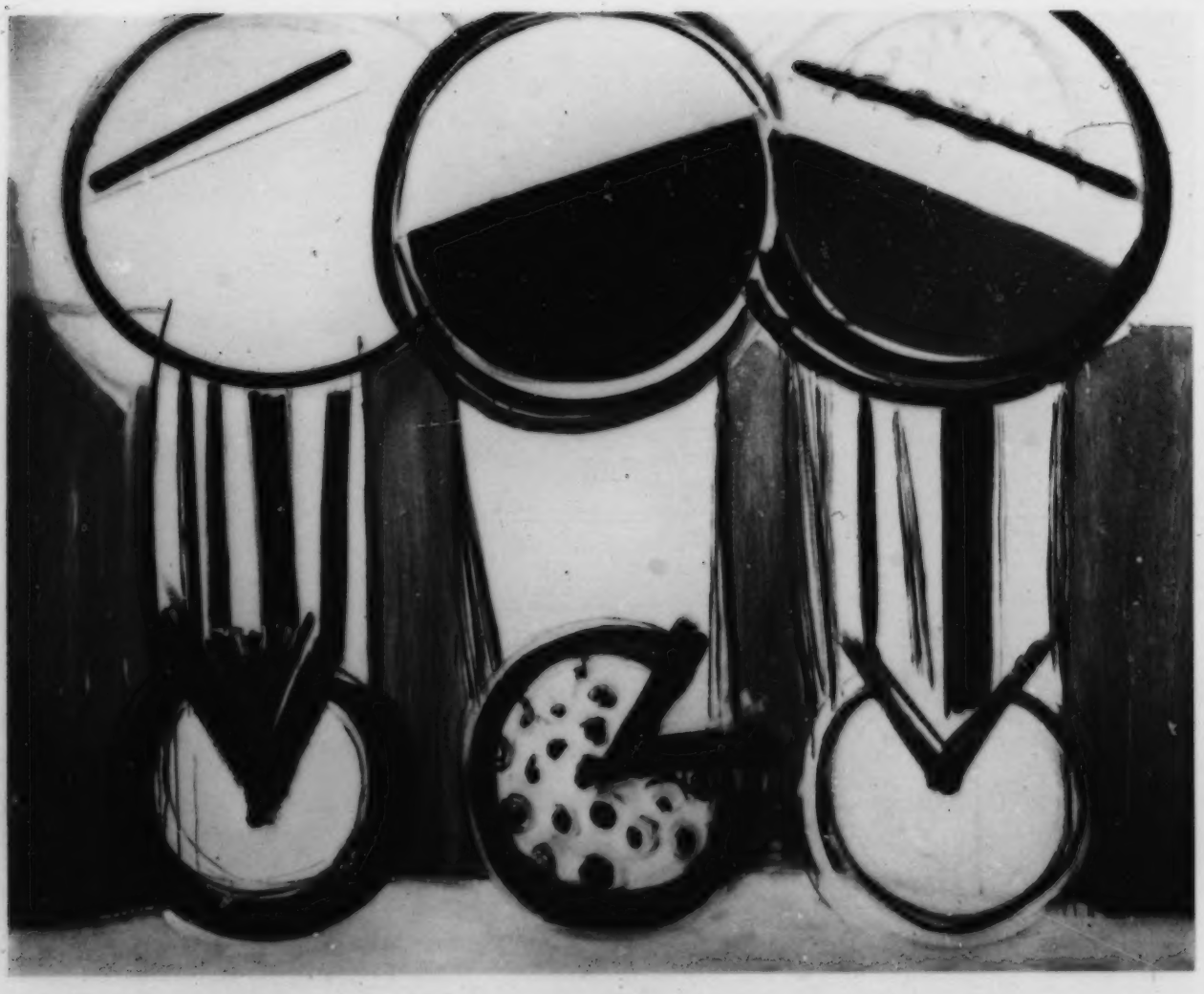
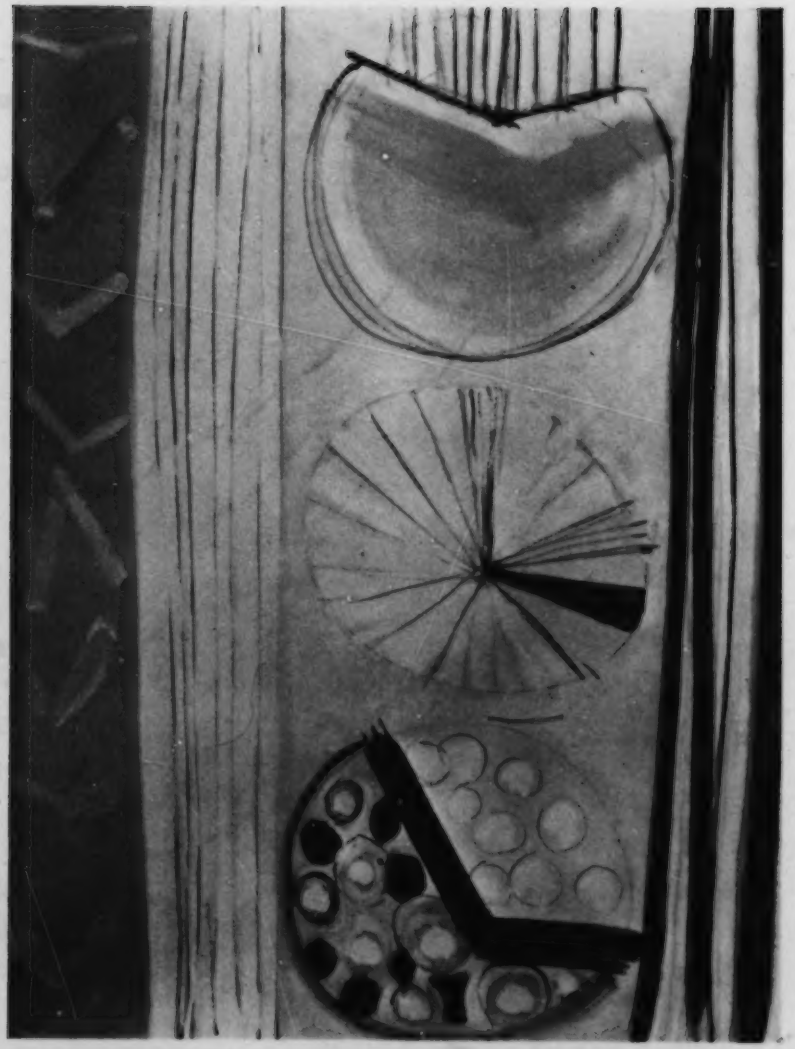
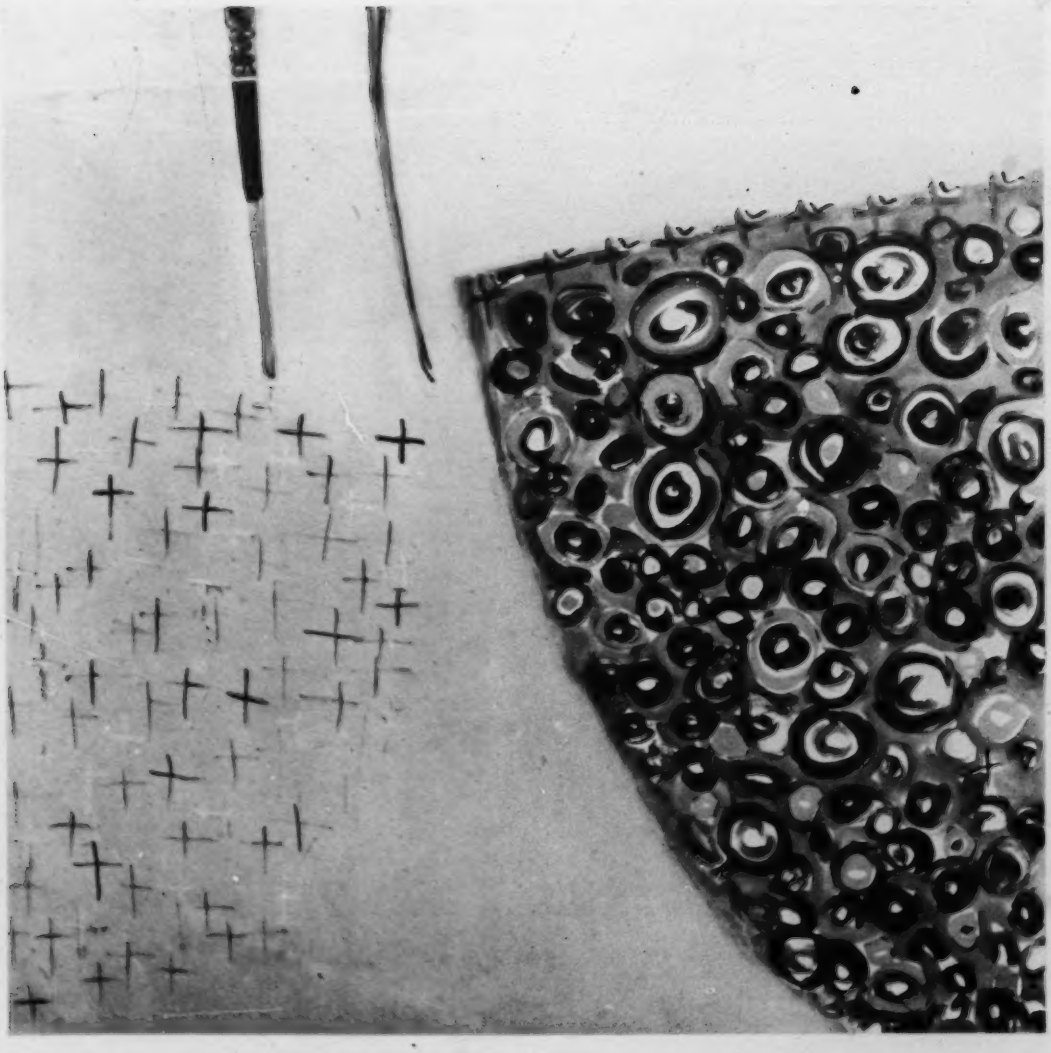


Catalogue No. 42 Three Graces, Red, Black and White, 1962

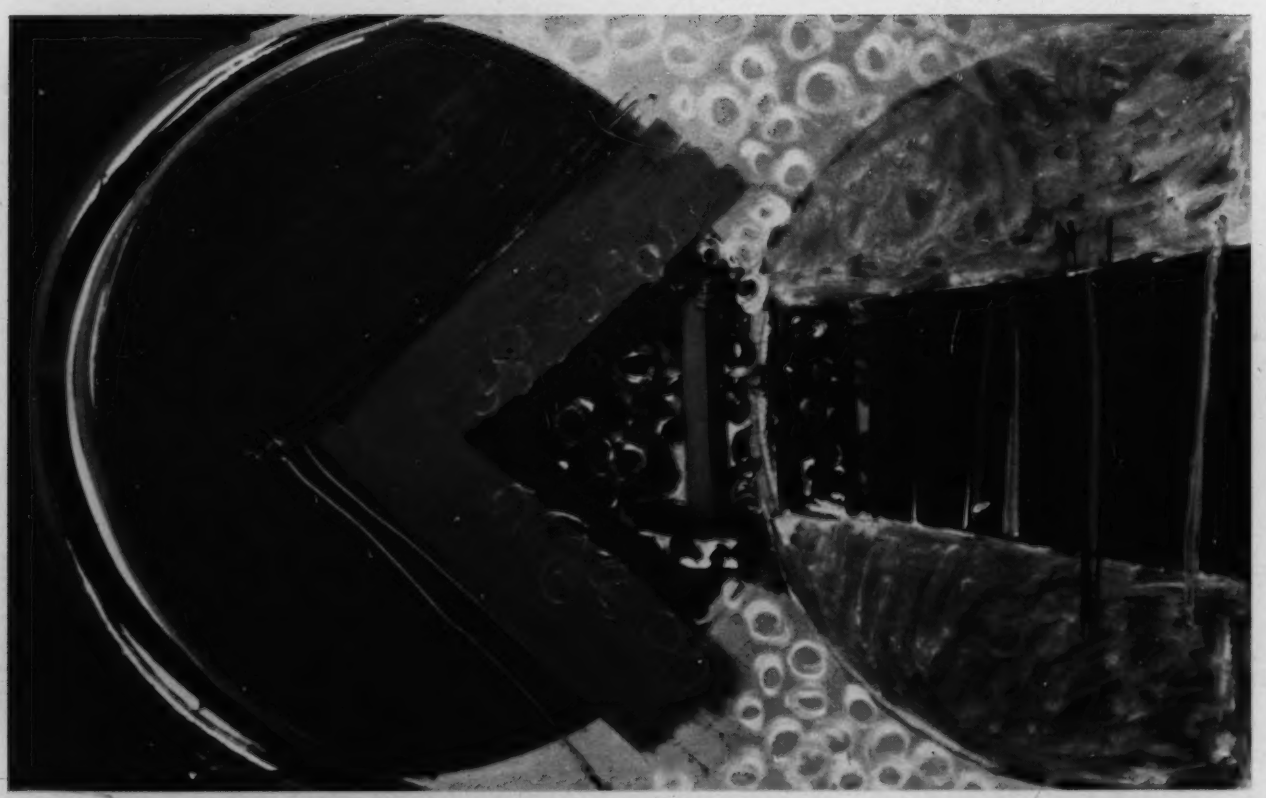
Catalogue No. 44 M. 17 October '62



Catalogue No. 47 Lemon and White, Spring 1963



Catalogue No. 49 May 'A' Day. 1963



Catalogue No. 46 Yellow Entry, January 1963